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SIR WALTER SCOTT CENTENARY DINNER.

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SPEECH  
OF  
MR. CHAS. MATHEWS,  
AT THE  
SIR WALTER SCOTT  
CENTENARY DINNER,  
AT ST. JAMES CLUB,

11TH AUGUST, 1871.

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## PREFACE.

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EARLY in the summer a meeting of gentlemen was held for the purpose of devising means for the due celebration of the centenary anniversary of the birth of Sir Walter Scott. At this meeting a Committee was appointed, and a number of conferences took place on the subject. It was found, however, that owing to the season of the year at which the anniversary occurred, and the fact that many persons were absent from the city with their families, it would be difficult to ensure such a public demonstration as would be worthy of so important an event. The general public celebration was, therefore, abandoned, and instead, the founding of a "Scott Scholarship" in the University of McGill, was resolved upon.

It was still, however, felt by a number of gentlemen that there should at least be something more to mark the centenary anniversary of so great a man as Sir Walter Scott; and while considering the matter an event occurred which led to the dinner at St. James' Club. Mr. Charles Mathews had accepted and was fulfilling an engagement at the Theatre Royal. The suggestion was made that if he, a contemporary and personal friend of Sir Walter Scott, could be induced to lend his assistance, something might be done. He was consulted on the subject, and the result was the dinner at St. James' Club House, particulars of which are here given. Less formal than some demonstrations which took place elsewhere, the circumstance of Mr. Mathew's presence at this dinner, and the personal references to Sir Walter Scott which he was able to make, render the St. James' Club dinner worthy of record among the many demonstrations which marked the general reverence for the memory of a great and good man.



## THE SCOTT CENTENARY.

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### THE CELEBRATION AT ST. JAMES' CLUB.

ON the evening of Friday, 11th August, a number of gentlemen, members of St. James' Club, and their guests, celebrated the Centenary of Sir Walter Scott by a dinner at the Club House, Dorchester Street. The following are the names of those present :

Sir HUGH ALLAN,	Hon. HENRY STARNES,
Mr. CHAS. MATHEWS,	Capt. PRYOR MATHEWS,
Mr. E. H. KING,	Mr. C. J. BRIDGES,
Mr. R. B. ANGUS,	Mr. H. S. MACDOUGALL,
Mr. G. A. DRUMMOND,	Mr. A. C. HOOPER,
Mr. F. W. THOMAS,	Mr. JACKSON RAE,
Col. MOFFATT,	Mr. LEGGER,
Mr. HUITON,	Mr. CRAMP,
Mr. COTTE,	Mr. THOS. WHITE, JR.,
Major WORSLEY,	Mr. SHELDON STEPHENS,
Mr. ROSE,	Mr. PRENTICE,
Mr. REEKIE,	Mr. G. STEPHEN,
Mr. W. RYLAND,	Mr. DES RIVIERES,
Mr. CAMERON,	Capt. BENYON,
Mr. STEWART,	Mr. CRAWFORD,
Mr. DUNLOP,	Mr. DESBARATS.

The chair was occupied (by request) by Mr. Charles Mathews.

After the removal of the cloth, Mr. Mathews gave the usual standard toasts, which were duly honoured.

Mr. Mathews then gave the toast of the evening, and, in doing so, said :

GENTLEMEN,

Under any other circumstances, I should begin by apologising for placing myself in the onerous position I now occupy ; but since you have done me the honor to invite me to it, I conclude that it is not only a compliment to myself but a pleasure to you to see me here. (Cheers.) With this flattering unction I confidently plunge into the task I have undertaken. I will not say that I am unfitted for it, for that would be casting a slur upon your judgment in electing me ; but in doing so (knowing me so well), you will not, I am sure, have reckoned on any brilliant display of eloquence on the occasion, but will be content to hear me address you in my own gossiply way, and allow me to chatter on with you as among old friends, instead of astonishing you with any elaborate bursts of oratory, carefully prepared, as for a grave and formal assembly. (Hear, hear.) There is no doubt that I ought, by right, to be a Scotchman to-night ; but here in Canada that necessity is not so strong as it would be at home, seeing that abroad the distinction between Scotch, English and Irish is not so marked. Here we are all " Britishers ;" and after



all, the works of the great man whose centenary we celebrate, are in reality cosmopolitan,—belonging to no country, to no nationality,—as well appreciated in England, Ireland, France, Italy, Germany, and wherever a printing press is to be found, as they are in Scotland itself. (Cheers.) I am quite aware that no Scotchman will allow this. To him it is an impertinence, almost an insult, to hear an Englishman pretend to relish Scott or Burns or Hogg; but in spite of his natural wish to appropriate to himself and his own country the mighty genius who sprang up from their midst, it is in vain that he attempts to exclude the whole civilized world from participating in his enthusiasm. (Hear, hear.) That many of the choicest bits of humor, the most characteristic points of his novels, are lost to the foreigner is unquestionable; they must, of course, be better enjoyed by his own countrymen who thoroughly understand every idiomatic expression. But fortunately his beauties are not confined to such minutiae. Even his Scotch novels are not wholly dependent upon such small matters as the correct transcript of his natural dialect. You might as well say that no man can enjoy the *Mysteries de Paris* who is not thoroughly conversant with the argot of the *Tapis Franc*. (Hear, hear.) It is the truth of his descriptions and of his characters, his adherence to nature, the interest of his stories, the purity of his style, the character of his sentiments, and the charming sweetness which prevails all his writings, that make him not only understood, but admired and beloved by readers of all nations. (Cheers.) Besides,—although Scotland owes him a debt of undying gratitude for having been the first to blazon forth her history,—to unveil her local beauties, and

illustrate her habits, her peculiarities, her romance, her superstitions, and making her the object of countless pilgrimages,—filling her hills and lochs with thousands of tourists from every land, anxious to visit the various localities which his pen has immortalized,—to penetrate the haunts of Rob Roy,—to explore the Trosachs, and behold the lovely scene of the Lady of the Lake,—to gaze upon the hundred spots peopled with his creations,—Stirling, Holyrood, the Grass Market, Mushat, Cairn,—places unnoticed and uncared for until his genius connected them with King James and Rizzio,—with Jeannie and Effie Deans,—let it be remembered that it is not Scotland alone that has been vivified by his magic wand, (Hear, hear) The Histories of England and of France have been equally subjected to his delightful treatment; and if his Lady of the Lake, Marmion, Rob Roy, Guy Manering, Heart of Mid Lothian, and so many others endear him to Scotland, his Ivanhoe, Nigel, Peveril, Quentin Durward and others make him equally dear to England and France, and thus we all claim kindred. (Cheers.) If Shakespeare was “not for an age, but for all time,” so Scott was not for a nation, but for the world at large. (Cheers.) He was the pioneer of a new epoch in Literature. What was the state of things before he burst upon the world? The novels of Smollett and Fielding, admirable as they were, had become too coarse for the delicacy of the age, as those of Pigault Lebrez had become in France. The Sir Charles Grandisons and Clarissa Harlows of Richardson, sinning in the opposite extreme, had grown wearisome from their conventional and stilted affectation of over delicacy; while the namby-pamby productions of the Minerva press had



brought novels into such disrepute that they were forbidden articles, and their perusal was not only held as pernicious, but their readers were actually objects of ridicule, the character of Lydia Languish having been expressly written by Sheridan to represent the type of the young Pedrus who indulged in them. The inflated romance of the Miss Porters were certainly less objectionable, but were fantastic and unreliable,—unreal and unprofitable; and the wild creations of Ann Radcliffe were mere vehicles for exciting the imaginations and harrowing the feelings. Miss Burney and Miss Edgeworth were undoubtedly writers of higher merit, but it was reserved for SCOTT to strike out a new vein,—to create a new era in composition,—to give works of fiction a higher character,—to combine with interest of story,—with truth of history and accuracy of detail,—the elegance of diction and the terseness of the essayist,—the stamp of nature,—the perfect delineator of character without exaggeration,—the inculcation of the soundest, sweetest and most unaffected morality,—so artistically blended that you have at once the charm of the novelist with the precision of the historian. (Cheers.) The effect of his first book was electric—a flash of lightning. It struck home to all hearts; it was a revelation. He was not aware of what he had done himself. On sending the first published copy of *Waverley* to his friend Moorett, he speaks of it as “a small anonymous sort of a novel,”—says that he began it long ago,—mislaid the manuscript for some time,—found it in an old cabinet,—took a fancy to it, and wrote the last two volumes in three weeks. He did not expect it to be popular, he said, in the south, as much of the humour was local. He did not put his name to

it, fearing so trifling a work might injure his reputation as a poet. He never for a moment imagined that the novelist was doomed to throw the poet into the shade, and that in a short time all Europe would ring with the fame of this "trifling anonymous sort of a novel," and the centennial celebration of the author's birthday be observed wherever civilization extended. (Cheers.) For twenty years he proceeded from success to success, from triumph to triumph, producing some thirty matchless works, which have been translated into every European language, and have never been surpassed. He founded a school which has given us countless worthy disciples, enriching our literature with admirable works of fiction—novels which, as he himself says, he may surely claim as the style

"Which he was born to introduce,  
Refined it first and showed its use."

But I am telling you nothing but what you know better than myself, and as Sneer says in the "Critic,"—"If her, Walter *knows* all this, why does her Christopher go on telling him?" and he is right. So I'll turn at once to what you don't know, and, as briefly as I can, give you one or two personal reminiscences. It is not vanity that prompts me to introduce myself into the subject, but an excusable pride; for if a Scotchman is proud of being SCOTT's townsman, or even his countryman,—of having been born in the same hemisphere,—surely I may be pardoned for feeling equal pride in having been honored with his intimacy,—of having visited him in Edinburgh, and been his guest at Abbotsford. (Cheers.) The first time I had the gratification of meeting him was on a memorable occasion. It was at a breakfast with Lord Byron in his rooms at Long's

Hotel. Scott, Terry, my father and myself made up the party. How I came there I don't know,—being then a mere boy of twelve or thirteen ; but I suppose my father managed it for me, and I have never forgotten it. I was all eyes and ears. Byron and Scott were both in high spirits, and it was a meeting to remember. Scott mentions it in his diary, and says it was the last time he ever met Byron. Little did I think then that nearly sixty years afterwards I should be presiding at the centenary of his birth at Montreal. The next day my father and myself accompanied him to Kenilworth and Warwick, and had the delight of roaming through the ruin with the distinguished man who was afterwards to expand and perfect his observations in the splendid novel founded upon them. The next time it was my good fortune to meet him was six or seven years later at another equally interesting breakfast. It was at Sir Francis Chantrey's, when he was sitting for the admirable bust that you all know so well. Chantrey stood at work at one corner of the room, while Scott, drawn out by my father and one or two others (Allan Cunningham I think was one), kept us in a constant state of delight by his endless anecdotes and pleasantries, his face lighting up at each sally with that comic expression so exquisitely caught and transferred to marble by Chantrey. (Cheers.) There is in the bust a play about the long upper lip and a twinkle of the eye that conveys the exact expression of Scott when on the point of delivering some touch of humour. On my return from Italy, I think in 1825, I again met him at a memorable dinner-party, at James Ballantyne's house, in Edinburgh, in company with Jeffrey, Wilson, Peter Robertson, Playfair and other notabilities ; and I remember with pleasure

Sir Walter in his diary mentions the occasion, and speaks of me as having "grown up a nice lad, who sang songs of his own composing, in the style of Coleman and James Smith, with much spirit." Many a time after did I dine with him in Castle Street, and was honoured with an invitation to stay with him at Abbotsford, — visiting Dryburgh and Melrose, as I had previously done Hawthorne Den and Roslyn with the great Sir Walter for a Cicerone. (Cheers.) But to what is all this tending? perhaps you will say. Well, I will tell you, and confess that I had a private object in view when I took the chair this evening. I am by profession an actor; but I am not *only* an actor, I am an ardent lover of the art I profess, and being often pained by hearing derogatory remarks respecting it, I am only too glad to seize upon any opportunity of exalting it in the eyes of the world. Now this was an occasion that I could not let slip. There is no greater guarantee for the worthiness of a thing than the estimation in which it is held by men we honour and respect; and there never was a more enthusiastic admirer and supporter of the Drama than Sir Walter Scott. From his earliest youth to his latest hour he took the liveliest interest in its welfare, and derived the greatest pleasure from the society of its most distinguished professors— John Kemble, Mrs. Siddons, Charles Young, my father, his dear and long-cherished friend and companion Terry, William Murray, the excellent Edinburgh manager, Charles Mackay, the Scotch actor pronounced by Sir Walter the perfect representative on the stage of his delicious creation of the Baillie Nicol Jervie, and hosts of others whom he always spoke of in the most friendly and frequently in the most affectionate terms

of regard. "I delight," says he in his diary, "in these professional men of talent. They always give you some new lights by the peculiarity of their habits and studies—so different from the people who are rounded and smoothed and ground down for conversation, and who can say all that every other person says—and nothing more." He recalls his first visit to a theatre after fifty years, and says that he had not since passed many hours of such unmixed delight, and even wonders that people having the means do not constantly spend their evenings at the theatre. He bought a share in the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, and for many years took an active part in its management—even superintending the rehearsal of one or two dramas founded on his own novels. And now I come to the crowning honour conferred by him upon the Theatrical profession. On the establishment of the fund for the relief of decayed actors in Edinburgh, Sir Walter was asked to take the chair at the first dinner given in aid of the subscription list of the new charity; and here in the presence of some 300 gentlemen,—here at a meeting of poor actors, after twenty years of mystery,—the Great Unknown, the Great Magician, the Wizard of the North, confessed his secret and for the first time openly avowed himself the author of the Waverly Novels! Was not this a triumph for my profession? (Cheers). After having shrouded his secret for so many years from the whole world; after having point-blank denied the authorship to his Sovereign, George the IV., who once indiscreetly asked him the question, he selected a meeting of actors for the important disclosure with which the newspapers teemed for weeks, and which was received with interest by the whole civilized world. (Cheers.) This was the



fact I wished to remind you of—an event which will ever be remembered by the members of my profession as one of the most gratifying compliments they have ever received, and which must, I think, surely exalt that profession in the estimation of the public. (Cheers.)

I have done, gentlemen, and I hope I have not trespassed too long upon your patience. I will now give you the toast of the evening: The hundredth anniversary of the day which gave birth to one of the greatest men that ever adorned society—who, next to Shakespeare, has entwined himself around the hearts of his fellow men—whose pen was never polluted by an unworthy or a coarse expression—whose works were invariably distinguished by the clearest spirit of honour, the most unaffected homage to religion—the most refined taste, the most chivalrous generosity of sentiments, and were throughout marked by good feeling and good sense. All honour to the day which gave birth to a great author and a great man. (Cheers.)

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A number of volunteer toasts followed, which were severally responded to, and with speech, song and sentiment, a most pleasant evening was passed.



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I have been thinking of you very much lately, and  
wondering how you are getting on. I hope you are  
well and happy. I have been very busy lately, but  
I have managed to find some time to write to you.

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